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ABSTRACT

In 1996, the Flemish Education Council was commissioned to create an educational project on the Flemish and their authorities, since authorities believed that education could play a major role in people's understanding of federal logic and the working of institutions. The Council developed a package on the Flemish and their authorities which was intended to educate students to be self-reliant and outspoken; encourage student participation in and responsibility for social events; and create open, analytical minds with the ability to clarify values. This paper describes political and democratic education, explaining that citizenship education is increasingly present in European curricula. It notes how students must be taught democratic values and critical thinking skills and must learn to express their opinions soundly and in an acceptable manner. It explains that in order for democratic education to succeed, it must begin with relevant problems from within the students' own worlds which are embedded in a wider social context. Using an integrated approach helps make democratic education successful. Other factors that are important in democratic education include a focus on school climate, on the school's learning activities and projects, and on the informal school curriculum. (SM)

De kracht van je stem
An educational project on the Flemish and their authorities

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1 Introduction

In 1996 the Flemish Education Council (Vlaamse Onderwijsraad (Vlor))¹ was commissioned by the Flemish government to start up a project on 'the Flemish and their authorities'. Starting point was the conclusion that the Flemish know very little about politics and authorities. On the other hand the conviction was held that, for a democracy to function well, a minimal insight in the working of the institutions is necessary. The authorities furthermore seconded Professor Billiet's² conclusion that education can play a major role in this process. He defined the central task of education in teaching federal logic and the functioning of our institutions and authorities. Moreover he stated that this should not only take place in the 3rd stage of secondary education³ as it would blow up the gap between lower and higher educated. Consequently secondary education as a whole, including vocational training, should be considered a target group.

Meanwhile minimum goals (attainment targets and developmental aims) are being formulated by the government. This is done at primary level and at every stage of secondary education. Citizenship education is one of the cross-curricular aims. Cross-curricular aims are formulated as an obligation for schools to take an initiative (either through a project or through individual work by teachers).

Society also called for 'democratic education'. Democratic points both to the way in which it is done and the aim that should be reached. The conviction grew that schools can no longer deny this challenge. And many of them take action by incorporating certain elements in the school practice. Opposite this positive conclusion, schools signal that they are overcharged and that there is very little up to date educational material on the matter. The Flemish authorities took the initiative to develop an educational package on the Flemish and their authorities. The actual realisation was assigned to the Vlor.

Being an advisory and consultative body in all educational matters that belong to the power of the Flemish authorities, the Vlor embodies all participants in education. They can consult and settle on e.g. educational innovation. Thus, by assigning the project to the Vlor, the Flemish government created the possibility to have educational material developed by those that would have to use it in the first place. This is done in six developing groups. A steering group, whose first task it was to set out the subject, contents and vision, co-ordinates the proceedings. When the project started in September 1996 the challenges were important and questions outnumbered the answers to a high extent.

¹ In the Flemish Education Council. all partners in education in Flanders as a whole, advise the authorities in educational matters and consult upon the realisation of innovative projects.

² J. Billiet, De kennis van de Vlamingen en hun houding tegenover de Vlaamse overheid en haar advertentiecampaagnes.

³ Secondary education is divided into 3 stages of two years each.

2 Growing challenges for education

In the past decades more attention is asked for educational projects. More and more stress is put on the educational task of schools rather than on the transfer of knowledge only. At the same time schools are expected to pay attention to contemporary problems. Parents, authorities, politicians and interest groups make a strong appeal to education to introduce social phenomena and problems as a proper subject in schools.⁴

Some of these subjects are being introduced gradually. The consequence is that more is added to the curricula than is taken away. Moreover educational projects demand a specific, often cross-curricular, approach. Our education however is subject-related to a high extent. It is not an easy task to redirect an overloaded ship.

On the other hand the field of education cannot afford, not from a pedagogical, nor from a social point of view, to deny certain educational projects. International developments and the need for coping skills oblige schools to take up responsibilities. The question is put to what extent schools can and must take up the challenge without passing over the very task of education.

The schools can answer this question in their school work plan⁵. The authorities on their side integrated a number of priorities in the attainment targets and the developmental objectives concerning learning to learn, social skills, citizenship education, health education and environmental education.

Thus the schools' responsibility is ambivalent. They have to put into practice the authority's educational policy on the one hand, and on the other they have to fill in additional priorities that shape the school's identity. Furthermore it must be stressed that not all projects are possible in schools and that other educational contexts must participate as well.

The implementation of educational projects is not obvious. One of the obstacles is a lack of appropriate and useful material. A lot of material that is now proposed to schools, is of unequal or even questionable quality. Moreover schools are not asking for these colourful packages. For 'De kracht van je stem' it was of the utmost importance to make educational material that could be used in the most immediate way. This workability had to join in with the curricula and the material had to be of a high 'gripping' level, both for teachers and for students. The freedom to determine the content of education had to be taken into account as well. Starting point is the autonomy of the school and its educational philosophy.

⁴ Think of multicultural education, human rights, environmental and health education, the prevention of drugs, road safety education, world citizenship, third world, consumer education, violence and vandalism.

⁵ An outline of the content and organization of teaching.

3 Political and democratic education

Democratic or citizenship education is more and more present in curricula throughout Europe. If it isn't, it is often part of another subject. The progress that was made throughout the sixties and seventies came to a standstill in the eighties. Citizenship education had become suspect and controversial. Due to the emancipation movement and anti-establishment action it was often identified with indoctrination or left or right activism. It led to the disappearance of citizenship education. If not, it was reduced to the teaching of political institutions. The question arose whether or not political education still had a future after the big world reform.

Gradually the climate changed. Following important social and political evolutions many realised the dangers of a lack of political or citizenship education. The questions put forward referred to identity, multiformity, prejudice, citizenship, all viewed from a local to world level. These questions are also an invitation to contemplate about the society and about the need to continuously adapt to more complex situations and problems. These arise as the result of the following evolutions:

- the growing technicality of our civilisation;
- modern communication and information media that influence the forming of an opinion to a growing extent;
- breaking through stereotypes;
- scaling up: the individual against local, regional, national, supranational authorities;
- withdrawal into oneself;
- evolution towards a multicultural society;
- attention for human rights and children's rights;
- attention for employment and unemployment, especially of youngsters.

Education should confront students with these questions to prepare them for an active and critical citizenship. Democracy does not only concretise in existing structures. It reveals itself in the way in which individuals and communities handle social challenges. Democracy is not static. In order to survive, it must be flexible enough to respond to those new challenges. The growing complexity of our society demands a greater insight and more skills to take personal standpoints, the readiness to work out solutions and to take up responsibility, and the awareness of values.

Although sociologists and political scientists have no conclusive answer to these questions, the expectation grows that youngsters are prepared for the difficult task to cooperate towards the further development of a society based on democratic rules. Schools will have to face this challenge more and more, starting from their own professionalism.

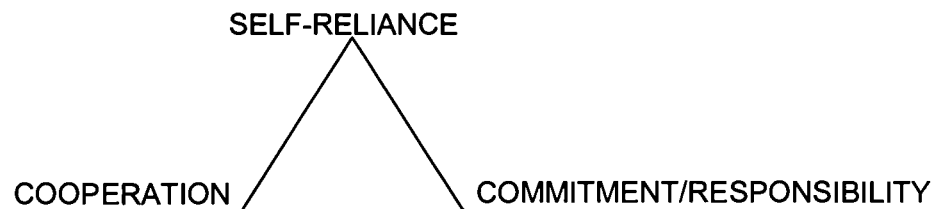
4 Democratic education as a project

Students are no born democrats. Hence democratic education is necessary to guarantee the maintenance and further development of our democratic society. Democratic education implies the teaching of knowledge, insights, skills and attitudes to enable citizens to act within a democratic context. As was mentioned earlier, democratic education cannot be limited to learning about institutions. It has to deal with democratic values and procedures, responsibility, participation, the role and importance of elections, majority and opposition, protection of minorities, consulting and compromising, the role of political parties and of pressure groups.

To guarantee the continuation of democracy, youngsters have to develop a democratic reflex. They have to be taught skills to deal critically with data flows and participation channels. Furthermore they have to learn to give a sound (theoretical) ground for their opinion(s) and to express that opinion in a socially acceptable manner. That's why the

dialogue is at the centre of the educational process. Expressing one's opinion, respecting someone else's, looking for solutions and striving for consensus, must be more important than being in the right.

Democratic education must also stimulate a sense of values. This means that within a society big groups accept certain values to be global. Some are laid down in constitutions and international treaties. Youngsters must learn to recognise these values within themselves and with others. The understanding that values guide our individual and collective behaviour, enhances the power of youngsters to come to sound points of view, to empathise with the points of view of others and to understand the ways in which policies and decisions come about. It is obvious that schools have to be very careful in developing a sense of values with their students: democratic education implies democratic thinking and doing. The values put down below and their interaction, both seem fundamental and acceptable for democratic education in school:



Democratic education exceeds class practice. Living together daily in school offers lots of possibilities to consult with students in real situations and to negotiate about subjects concerning the students. School can be considered a surrounding that at the same time allows practice and active participation. Thus they will experience democratic rules, their advantages and disadvantages. An open climate offers an ideal context for students to practice communication and negotiation skills and to gain an insight in the structures of society, in the process of decision-making, in power and authority.

It is obvious that student participation is an essential part of democratic education at school. It is equally important that it is applied in the most serious and careful way in order not to bring about the opposite effect. It means that all students have to be involved, that they are given real participation and that their decisions are taken into serious account. Hence school culture and organisation play an important role in the success of democratic education at school. Student participation should be an essential part of the school system that exceeds formal obligations and that starts at the level of individual relationships.

5 A suited approach

If democratic education is to be successful, it is very important that it starts from relevant problems emerging from the living environment of the youngsters and that it is embedded in a wider social coherence. Furthermore it is obvious that it always has to take into account the level of the target group.

Realising aims of democratic education at school, requires suited methodology. An educational approach that merely tries to convince students must be replaced by an approach that examines and accounts for, in so far that it combines the student's participation with an open mind towards and respect for the student. Stimulating group work enhances co-operation and problem solving.

It is important anyway that there be no hidden agendas at the beginning of the discussion and that the discussion itself is not used to homogenise: multiformity is both the starting point and the outcome of the educational process. A lack of multiformity leads to prejudice,

intolerance, totalitarianism and exclusion. Rather than to strive for the ultimate and only possible perspective, democratic education must aim at the process of justifying points of view, making decisions together, and conducting actions to make those decisions happen. The creation of an educational environment that stimulates the participation of all students, presupposes that their contribution be evaluated based on their preparedness to participate.

An integrated approach is the best way to realise democratic education at school. Thus one can aim at an overall picture with the students and try and avoid overlaps and fragmentation. Although schools cannot completely control this process, they have to pay attention to vertical and horizontal coherence in their democratic education. Concerning vertical coherence there should be a build up from primary school onwards up to the 3rd stage of secondary education. Concerning horizontal coherence the starting point is a cross-curricular component. This means:

1 working on democratic education within several subjects. Basically all subjects should be taken into account. However, subjects such as geography, economics, history, religion or ethics, are more suitable to integrate democratic education given their specific aims and curricula.

2 realising democratic education in coherence with other projects. Practising democratic skills is connected with social skills. It can be done through environmental education, human rights education, road safety education,...

3 the organisation of activities or projects concerning democratic education, e.g. school trips, integrated projects and the like.

6 A project for the school as a whole

When a choice, concerning democratic education, is made and priorities defined, the following step consists of involving the school as a whole in the realisation of the project. The points of interest, to be found underneath, can be considered a checklist or a source of inspiration.

School policy

Democratic education

- is an explicit aim in the school work plan,
- is supported by the school management team,
- involves all staff and students,
- is planned, coherent and constructive,
- involves as many aspects of the curriculum as possible,
- has an impact on students,
- is regularly checked for effectiveness and adjusted thereafter.

The school climate

- promotes self esteem, respect towards fellow students and other cultures,
- is responsible for the well-being,
- stimulates participation,
- stimulates communication and has an open, internal communication system,
- reflects care, concern and commitment,
- incites trust, self-reliance and co-operation,
- sees to it that everyone involved has an insight in his or her rights, responsibilities and duties,
- gives evidence of appreciation of the learning process and shows in a positive way the students' results,
- promotes a continuing evaluation and adjustment of the class climate.

The learning and instructional process

- promotes effective learning for all students,
- stimulates individual progress,
- meets individual needs,
- allows students to take responsibility for their own learning process.

The school's learning activities and projects

- incite active work,
- involve all students,
- guarantee a wide range of viewpoints, encourage openness and discussion and fight prejudice,
- stimulate research,
- promote independent, individual work as well as group work,
- lead to independent and critical thought,
- stimulate creativity and imagination,
- are diversified.

The informal school curriculum

- creates opportunities for activities that are not comprehended in the curricula,
- supposes well suited activities, indoors as well as outdoors.

These activities

- promote a democratic attitude,
- promote positive and successful experiences,
- are relevant and useful,
- are co-ordinated,
- involve all,
- are progressive and build on previous experiences.

7 The Vlor-project 'De kracht van je stem'

The project is convinced that democratic education is an essential curricular component. It hopes that schools will take it to heart. However it is also aware of the fact that it demands a lot of commitment from schools. And schools already have elaborate tasks. Therefore the project wants to support schools by offering them educational material that is well-balanced in its approach of knowledge, skills and attitudes, and that meets the attainment targets and developmental aims.

The project aims at:

- educating youngsters to be self-reliant and talkative,
- the participation of youngsters in social events, taking up responsibility (social aim),
- creating an open mind for and competence to analyse and clarify values (ethical aim).

Starting point is the autonomy of schools to realise these aims based on their own educational philosophy. The project therefore offers material that schools can use voluntarily. It does not intend to straitjacket schools. It rather strives at an offer that is noncommittal and not restricted. Thus schools can choose for themselves taking into account their population, educational philosophy and traditions.

Aims

These aims are valid for all levels. They are specified at each level for which material is developed.

General aim

The students gain knowledge, skills and attitudes that enable them to act as a critical individual and citizen in a democratic constitutional state, which is their own, and that functions within the international community.

Specific aims

Cognition

The students

- acquire insight and knowledge in the liberties, rights and responsibilities of the citizen and in the children's rights;
- acquire insight and knowledge in the structure and action of political institutions and decision-making at all governmental levels;
- acquire insight in the responsibilities of the government;
- know that a policy originates from different ideas, points of view and interests;
- acquire insight in the way in which ideas and points of view originate and lead to actual decisions through consult;
- see that any policy has to take into account available means;
- see the importance of information channels and the media in a democratic society.

Skills

The students

- are able to select information and to use it to gain a deeper insight in social items and problems;
- are able to recognise and analyse a problem and to find alternative solutions concerning social items and problems;
- are able to put into words and account for a differentiated point of view about social items, problems and proposals that are made on the matter and they can adjust their point of view;
- are able to handle decision-making processes;
- are able to put into practice decisions and to feedback about them.

Attitudes

The students

- have a feeling for basic democratic values and they experience them (family, class, school, friends, local community, international organisations working for youngsters);
- enter into a social agreement and dedicate oneself personally;
- accept the citizen's responsibility and take an active part in political life;
- react critically towards their own and other people's points of view and towards information in general;
- respect opinions, arguments and the dignity of others in a multicultural society and in a pluralistic debate;
- have a critical attitude towards institutional forms of power and authority;
- respect our democratic institutions and procedures.

8 'De kracht van je stem': structure and justification

The original starting point for this project was the obvious lack of knowledge among the Flemish concerning their authorities and institutions⁶. More recent scientific research⁷ also points to a general lack of interest in politics and even a quite cynical attitude towards politicians. It is e.g. a very common belief that politicians are only interested in one's vote and not in one's point of view. This conviction is typical both of youngsters and adults. Contrary to what some may think, adults are even more cynical than youngsters. The name of the project 'De kracht van je stem' expresses the firm conviction that this attitude can be changed. In Dutch it means 'the power of one's vote'. But 'stem' also means voice. The expression as a whole should be interpreted as 'One's vote and voice can make a difference.'

When one agrees with the fact that at least some understanding of the democratic structures is necessary to guarantee the functioning of democracy, a student-minded approach becomes absolutely necessary. But not only insight and understanding should be transferred, since they offer no guarantee for a truly democratic attitude. The project equally aims at skills and attitudes.

This led to a widening of the subjects (horizontal) and a larger target group (vertical).

The project eventually chose for 4 complementary themes:

- Human rights and children's rights
- Democracy and constitutional state
- Elections and parties
- Authorities and institutions

Human rights and children's rights

Article 42 of 'The Convention on the Rights of the Child' states that

"States Parties undertake to make the principles and provisions of the Convention widely known, by appropriate and active means, to adults and children alike."

This is exactly what this project wants to achieve: children should know their rights, should be able to claim them and to exert them. Moreover they must know and realise that rights imply duties, that the exertion of their rights implies that they have certain responsibilities.

Being aware of rights and responsibilities makes the introduction of the following themes a lot more simple and obvious.

Democracy and constitutional state

Rules and the acceptance of rules are at the basis of our society. Explaining to youngsters the principles of a constitutional state is a challenge. They often choose for simple, black and white solutions. Their sense of justice often makes them forget about the principles of constitutional state: the division of the powers.

These principles are the basis of our western democracies.

⁶ J. Billiet, De kennis van de Vlamingen en hun houding tegenover de Vlaamse overheid en haar advertentiecampagnes.

⁷ M. Elchardus, Zonder Maskers, een actueel portret van jongeren en hun leraren. Globe, 256 blz.

Elections and parties

Democracy is made workable through elections and political parties. The right to vote expresses the right to be part of the country's policies and issues. What is the impact of our vote? And would our vote have the same impact in any country? Or does democracy externalise itself in different ways?

It is also obvious that political parties play an important role in this. What is their role and how can we be part of it?

Authorities and institutions

The former leads to the original starting point of the project: knowledge about our institutions and authorities. How does our government work? What are the principles of democratic decision-making? What are the powers of the mayor? And of the minister? And of the king? All authorities are taken into account: local, provincial, regional, national, European.

The position of Flanders in Belgium, Europe and the world and our multicultural society deserve equal attention. That's how the project avoided one-sidedness.

The basis for this challenging task is to be laid in primary education. There also a lot of attention is paid to rights and responsibilities. The recognition of children's freedom of speech (article 13) in connection with their right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them (article 12) appeals to an educational approach based on dialogue and interaction. This way the 'The Convention on the Rights of the Child' adds up to the development of a democratic reflex. The participation of young people in processes of decision-making is one of the pillars of the project.

At each level (3rd stage of primary education, 1st, 2nd and 3rd stages of secondary education, including vocational training) all 4 themes get a chance. At the younger levels the stress is on skills and attitudes. Gradually cognition becomes more important. At the younger levels also, attention is paid to local authorities, however already embedded in larger units. Older levels learn to look at the national and international scene, without losing attention for skills and attitudes.

This method of thematic enlargement leads to a better understanding, but also to an overall view of the political and institutional landscape. The students' insight is deepened throughout the years. This overall view is to be preferred above a thorough knowledge of one level. However it must be avoided that students have a feeling of 'this is something we saw last year'. The material must therefore meet severe conditions of creativity and variation.

The Ministry of the Flemish Community, Education Department, puts forward attainment targets. Education for active citizenship is a cross-curricular developmental aim. The project strongly wants to meet these aims in as far as they have been voted by the Flemish Council. The material that is being developed corresponds with these attainment targets, at least up to the 2nd stage of secondary education. In the case of the 3rd stage the material preceded the targets.

9 The products of 'De kracht van je stem'

The project develops material for the following target groups:

- 3rd stage of primary education (age 10-11)
- 1st stage of secondary education (age 12-13)
- 2nd stage of secondary education (age 14-15)
- 3rd stage of secondary education (age 15-16)
- 2nd, 3rd and 4th stages of vocational education (12-18 and beyond)

At each level there is student material and an appropriate teacher's guide.

However, the first product issued (March 1999) was an information map for teachers. Indeed one may expect an equally low knowledge of the authorities and the institutions among teachers as among the rest of the population. Although later research⁸ proved that teachers show much more political awareness than the average population, setting out a frame within which to work, has proved very useful. This information map offers background, history, comment and knowledge on the 4 themes presented.

Together with the information map, material was issued for the 3rd stage of secondary education. In November 1999 the package for vocational education was ready. In May 2000 the 3rd stage of primary education will be presented together with the first part of the material (on elections and parties) for the 1st stage of secondary education.

Also in May 2000 a compact disc will be issued. Originally it was meant for students age 16-17, but it may be equally useful and interesting for their adults. The rest of the educational material (for the 1st and 2nd stages of secondary education) will follow in the course of 2000.

It is challenging to develop material that, in spite of dealing with the same themes, always aims at a varied and original approach. Variation is necessary both horizontally and vertically. Horizontally it means that the material has to offer several types of exercises that realise the aims in the most different ways. Vertically it means that the authors had to avoid a feeling of irritating and boring recognition. The different types of material prove that the authors have met with the challenge.

10 Looking forward

The project 'De kracht van je stem' reaches an important part of Flemish youngsters. Although the reactions are very positive, it is impossible at this point to measure the results brought about by this material. One can hope that it enhances the democratic attitude that many of them already display. On the other hand it should open the discussion towards a more permanent attention for democracy, rights and responsibilities, institutions and authorities, elections, politics, constitutional state, etc... from the part of the authorities and the education world.

Moreover there are other groups in society that may need or ask for democratic education: types of special education, second-chance education, adult education, part-time secondary vocational education among others. These groups are often very easily influenced by all sorts of extreme ideologies that may represent a considerable threat to democracy. If one dares to look forward, one will realise that there is still a lot of work to be done.

Robert Lenaerts and Chris Wyns

⁸ M. Elchardus, Zonder Maskers, een actueel portret van jongeren en hun leraren. Globe, 256 blz.



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